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Promoting Firearms Marking in Latin America and the Caribbean

Marking firearms is an important step in combating illicit weapons trafficking. To promote marking and tracing among countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Organization of American States has strengthened national capacities to mark firearms by providing equipment and related training since 2009.

by Lourdes Rincón [Organization of American States]

In the last decade, more than one million people died in Latin America and the Caribbean as a result of criminal violence.¹ Moreover, according to statistical information on citizen security provided by members of the Organization of American States (OAS), 75 percent of intentional homicides in the Americas were committed with a firearm. The proportion of intentional homicides by firearms was even higher for South America and Central America, at 83 percent and 78 percent, respectively.²

Despite significant progress made in consolidating democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean during the last decades, the countries of the region still face considerable challenges in tackling armed violence. Public security constitutes a high priority for citizens and regional government authorities.

Numerous factors contribute to armed violence such as weak governance, poverty, rapid urbanization and a lack of employment opportunities. However, easy access to illicit firearms is undoubtedly one of the main factors.

Adopted in 1997, the *Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials* (CIFTA) provides a regional framework for addressing the control and management of firearms as a necessary step for ensuring greater citizen security and reducing armed violence. As the technical secretariat for CIFTA, the OAS Department of Public Security (OAS-DPS) implemented corresponding efforts to support OAS member states in fulfilling their obligations to adopt legislative measures criminalizing the illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms under domestic law. CIFTA

requires firearms to be marked upon manufacture and importation to ensure the security of national firearms stockpiles, as well as the exchange of information with other CIFTA signatories with respect to national control mechanisms and illicit-trafficking patterns.

Permanently marking a firearm with identifiable information, such as a serial number, name, place of manufacturer or importer, model, and caliber, is considered an important step in combating illicit firearms trafficking. Marked items are easier to trace and link to crimes in which they were used, thus increasing law enforcement and prosecutorial capabilities. By increasing tracing abilities, states are able to identify trafficking routes and arms traffickers more effectively, and can prosecute them accordingly.

OAS and Firearms Marking

Beginning in September 2009, OAS-DPS implemented the project Promoting Firearms Marking in Latin America and the Caribbean. With initial and subsequent contributions totaling US\$1,182,493 from the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), OAS-DPS sought to strengthen national capacities to mark imported, exported or confiscated firearms in accordance with CIFTA legal requirements.

Through this project, beneficiary countries were eligible to receive at least one dot-peen marking machine, which uses small dots to mark products for identification, related equipment and training.³ To do so, interested countries needed to agree to the terms outlining the equipment's maintenance and use by signing a



The dot-peen marking machine.
All photos courtesy of the author.

cooperation agreement with the general secretariat of OAS. From 2009 to 2014, 25 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean signed the cooperation agreement with OAS and joined the project.⁴

In December 2010, OAS-DPS and the government of Costa Rica organized and held a regional workshop on firearms marking in San Jose, Costa Rica, with the objective of raising awareness on the importance of marking firearms to combat illicit trafficking. In addition, the workshop sought to strengthen cooperation and promote information exchange among government authorities responsible for firearms marking at international, national and regional levels. Twenty-six participants, representatives of governments, international, regional, subregional and other organizations, had the opportunity to share their experiences and summarize actions undertaken to promote firearms marking and combat illicit trafficking.

During 2011, 15 marking machines and laptop computers were provided to participating governments along with training. For the majority of cases, the training consisted of a two-day course for six to 10 participants. The preparation included instruction on using the marking machine, setup and calibration, data con-

figuration, storage and technical procedures related to marking and record keeping.

During the first quarter of 2012, OAS-DPS conducted a study on national firearms-marking laws and practices. The study's objective was to identify laws, regulations and procedures in OAS member states regarding firearms marking and to measure the level of compliance with CIFTA. Specifically, the study analyzed countries' marking procedures at the time of manufacture, import, and confiscation or forfeiture. This study was presented at the Third Conference of the States Party to CIFTA in May 2012.

Also during the Third Conference, OAS-DPS conducted a roundtable on firearms marking. In this activity the participating countries had an opportunity to share their experiences, successes and challenges faced as part of the Promoting Firearms Marking in Latin America and the Caribbean project. The information provided by national authorities was essential for OAS to continue assessing the program's progress made and impact in the region, as well as to identify each country's specific needs.

In 2012, 17 marking machines and laptop computers were provided with training on how to use the



Training includes instruction on the use of the marking machine, setup and calibration, data configuration, storage, and technical procedures related to marking and record keeping.

equipment. After receiving reports from some national authorities on the difficulty involved in marking certain types of firearms due to lack of proper equipment, 30 vises for holding the firearms while they are marked were donated to requesting countries between 2012 and 2013. In addition, between January 2013 and May 2014, seven marking machines were turned over to national authorities, and OAS carried out refresher training in Dominica and El Salvador.

As of 2014, 39 marking machines and 30 vises were donated to 25 countries along with 39 laptop computers to facilitate the record-keeping process. OAS trained some 280 national authorities to use the equipment. As a result, more than 287,000 firearms were marked in the region.

Lessons Learned

Through this initiative OAS-DPS found that marking and tracing initiatives require long-term national commitment. While providing equipment and related training to each of the member states is a necessary step for the project's initiation, it also requires that each of the national governments include the marking of firearms and record keeping as part of their long-term control

strategy. The state is responsible for conducting effective firearms marking and record keeping in continued support of a system that will make tracking illicit firearms possible in the future.

National legislation allowing the marking of firearms is also key to a successful firearms control strategy. OAS-DPS found that most countries in the region have few or no legal provisions for marking firearms at the point of manufacture, import or confiscation, and require assistance to update their legal regimes to continue marking government stockpiles and civilian-owned firearms.

Common parameters to be recorded during marking activities were also needed. At the request of the member states that acceded to CIFTA, OAS-DPS drafted a regional standard for marking and record keeping, covering aspects such as size, font and depth of marking, as well as the types of information to be recorded in order to facilitate illicit firearms identification and tracking. The draft, regional standard was presented at the CIFTA Consultative Committee meeting in April 2013 for consideration and approval at the May 2014 meeting of the states parties. The final document will be presented for approval at the 2015 CIFTA meeting.



A marked weapon.

Continued Necessity

Despite important advances made through the OAS-DPS project, a considerable number of firearms still require marking. Many governments in Latin America and the Caribbean maintain large national stockpiles, often remnants of long-resolved internal and external conflicts. Even with the provision of a limited number of marking machines, most governments in the region still lack adequate technical capacity to mark and keep record of all weapons manufactured, imported and confiscated in an effective way. The majority of participating OAS member states require additional equipment; OAS has already received requests for additional marking machines from various governments. Moreover, nearly all participating states require additional technical assistance, training and follow-up to ensure that efforts continue to mark and maintain records of firearms.

Through these and related initiatives, OAS seeks to support the efforts of its member states for marking and tracing in order to strengthen member states' capacities to respond to the increasing levels of crime and violence caused by illicit firearms trafficking. ©

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Lourdes Rincón is responsible for the project, Promoting Firearms Marking in Latin America and the Caribbean, and for supporting CIFTA activities on marking and tracing of firearms within the OAS Department of Public Security. Rincón also manages the external communications for violence reduction at OAS. She joined OAS in 2011 and contributed to the production of a series of legislative studies to determine the degree of implementation of CIFTA recommendations within States Parties. Rincón holds a law degree from Coahuila Autonomous University (Mexico).

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